CAST DOWN, BUT NOT FORSAKEN!

A SERMON

DELIVERED IN

St. Philip's Church, Charleston,

DECEMBER 15TH, 1861,

BEING THE SUNDAY AFTER THE GREAT FIRE.

BY REV. W. B. W. HOWE,

ASSISTANT MINISTER OF ST. PHILIP'S.

PRINTED BY REQUEST.

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SERMON.

Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?—Job ii, 10.

The book of Job, my beloved brethren, is the book of divine Providence, and exhibits the method according to which the divine purposes manifest themselves in relation to men. The key which unlocks this method, and which gives us to know the teaching of this sublime book, is found in this simple question: Do great temporal calamities, which are permitted to befall a person or an entire community, necessarily imply some great and crying sin as their root and cause, out of which they grow, and upon which they are visited as a punishment? Or, in other words, do great trials point infallibly to great crimes, which have invited the severe vengeance of an offended God?

If we keep this in mind, as we read the complainings of Job and the reproaches of his friends, we shall be guided to a satisfactory interpretation of their reasonings. Let us briefly glance at the condition of things as set before us. We are first of all introduced, in the opening verse, to the principal personage himself—the patriarch, who was soon to be so sorely tried both for his own and for others' profit.

"There was a man," it says, "in the land of Uz, whose

name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God and eschewed evil." His worldly prosperity is also set forth, and he is pronounced to be "the greatest of all the men in the East." A sudden and overwhelming reverse, however, overtakes him and blasts all his pleasant prospects, and lays him low in the dust. Stroke upon stroke, and bolt upon bolt, follow in quick and awful succession, to his own amazement and that of neighbors and friends, till what was once a fair and blooming tree, laden also with fruit, is now dead and withered. "There was a day," so says the inspired record, "when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house; and there came a messenger unto Job and said, The oxen were ploughing, and the asses feeding beside them, and the Sabeans fell upon them, and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

While *he* was yet speaking, there came also another and said, The fire of God is fallen from Heaven, and hath burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them, and I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

While *he* was yet speaking, there came also another and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away; yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword.

While *he* was yet speaking, there came also another and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house; and behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote upon the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men and they are dead." Nor was this the full extent of the awful visitation. To crown the whole, Job himself, in the depths of all his sorrows, is smitten with a loathsome

disease, so that now maddening physical pain is added to all his mental disquiet.

In a transport of despair, brought on by such an accumulation of bitter woes, his wife bids him curse God and die: for it was to no purpose that he served a Being who had proved so indifferent to a faithful servant. But Job's reply is that sublime one in our text, "What! shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" By *evil*, of course, we are not to understand moral evil; for with such, God does not tempt or try any man: but outward evil, such as consists in adverse circumstances and misfortunes.

In this state of apparent abandonment, for it was only apparent, his bosom friends find him.

His wealth has all fled and his children perished, and he himself so smitten with disease that there is no whole part in his body. So changed is he, and so marred is his countenance by mental anguish, and by the hand of God, that they are unable to recognise him; and they lift up their voice and weep in lamentation over one once so exalted, but now, alas, brought so low. Job is the first to break the silence of seven days and seven nights, which amazement and sympathy for his distressed condition had imposed upon the friends: and he does it to lament the day of his birth.

He looks to another existence for solace, and to a world where the wicked cease from troubling as the haven where he would be; "*there* the weary be at rest; there the prisoners rest together; they hear not the voice of the oppressor."

But his friends by no means strike upon the same key. They, too, have been revolving in their minds the

probable cause of Job's calamities, and they have come to the conclusion that some sins or sin which he has been secretly addicted to, and which have escaped observation, have at last found him out, and that he is now undergoing the due reward of his evil deeds. They more than intimate that his former piety was only a mere show, put on to conceal his real character; and their exhortation is, to confess his hypocrisy and show his crimes, which, though hitherto kept carefully concealed, have now at length brought down upon him the just vengeance of Jehovah. They assume it as an axiom, and as a truth which can admit of no disputing, that God's afflictive dispensations are purely and simply *punitive*, and that they are invariably meted out to transgressors of Divine Laws. Their words, and still harsher insinuations of criminal conduct, of which Job's conscience acquitted him, are gall and wormwood to the tortured and agonized soul of the patriarch.

They try him so as by fire. They show that the friends in whom he trusted deem him unworthy, and a hypocrite.

The sympathy which should have been his, and which ought to have aided his faith to bear up under the clouds and darkness which now encompassed him, is nowhere made manifest; but, on the contrary, his wounded spirit is treated with the frosty precepts of false wisdom and hoary traditions. Feeling in his inmost soul how much and how cruelly his former friends misunderstood him, and seeing how all their former faith in his integrity was shaken and overthrown, so that in their eyes he was now not only stricken with external poverty, but also had lost what was far better—a character for integrity and

piety. He exclaims: "How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words?"

"I have heard many such things, miserable comforters are ye all. Shall vain words have an end? I also could speak as ye do; if your soul were in my soul's stead, I could heap up words against you, and shake mine head at you. But I would strengthen you with my mouth, and the moving of my lips should assuage your grief." He appeals unto God. He denies not that he is a sinner, because there is no man that liveth and sinneth not; but he denies being such an one as their arguments would go to show. He denies having been a hypocrite, on account of which they maintained he was now being visited with sore judgments from God. He felt assured, from his own experience, that they had failed utterly and miserably, and harshly in their interpretations of God's providences with regard to him. When he examined himself, he felt assured that, say what they would, and insinuate what they would, he was still not guilty of any *special* crimes which had brought down these judgments upon him. There must be some other way of accounting for his great trials. What this was he was not at all certain, and in vindicating himself from their charges, he said many things concerning God which, no doubt, were rash and ill-advised; but still, on the whole, Job came much nearer the truth than those who were his exhorters. *His* fault was charging God foolishly; but *theirs* wholly to distort the truth. He, in his anguish, forgot at times that God was in heaven and he upon earth, and he may have challenged the Divine Counsels with too great freedom, so as to have approached the borders of irreverence; but *they* were guilty of lying for God.

All is decided in the conclusion of this book. There God enters into judgment with his servants, and settles the controversy between Job and his friends. He first rebuked Job, but with the utmost gentleness. "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up thy loins now like a man, for I will demand of thee and answer thou me, Where wast *thou* when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding."

And, thereupon, the Lord graciously takes his afflicted servant through the various kingdoms of nature, and bids him observe their variety and sublime order, and the mysteriousness of the laws which govern them, and how impossible it is that he should comprehend them. "Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea?" "Knowest thou the ordinances of heaven?" "Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion? Canst thou bring forth Mazzaroth in his season? Or canst thou guide Arcturus with his sons?" "Hast thou given the horse strength? Hast thou clothed his neck with thunder?" "Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom and stretch her wings to the south?"

The argument comes home to Job with crushing effect. If, as God has shown him, he cannot overtake the divine purposes in all their sublime and majestic scope, as revealed in outward nature, with his finite understanding; if the stars in their courses, and the flowers in their beauty, and the instincts of animals, in their unerring wisdom, set him at defiance, and teach him to admire their Creator's wisdom, cannot he, also, rely upon that same wisdom in his providential dealings with *men*, and even

when they seem most dark and obscure, believe that divine thought and care preside over them all? Shall wisdom and order be everywhere else, save in God's dealings with man?

Job bows to the truth, and says: "I know that thou canst do everything, therefore have I uttered that I understood not: things too wonderful for me, which I knew not. I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee." The Lord turns next to Job's friends, and puts the question, which they had discussed with so much vehemence, forever at rest.

While suffering comes originally from sin, inasmuch as had there been no sin in the world there would have been no suffering; still this general truth is not to be distorted, as they had done who had made Job's afflictions the punishment of his individual crimes, and had overlooked altogether the fact *that they were tests of faith, to result in blessing if rightly improved.* And the Lord said to Eliphar the Temanite, my wrath is kindled against thee and against thy two friends, for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath. "Therefore, take unto you now seven bullocks and seven rams, and go to my servant Job and offer up for yourselves a burnt-offering, and my servant Job shall pray for you; for him will I accept; lest I deal with you after your folly, in that ye have not spoken of me the thing which is right, like my servant Job." Such is very briefly and imperfectly the leading thought and design in this wonderful book. It is addressed to meet the ever-recurring question, as to *why* God afflicts, and to warn us that we may not reason, from individual suffering, to the conclusion that the sufferer is a greater sinner than one who escapes.

God's judgments are not thus limited to this world. And yet it is harder to cast out this demon than almost any other. Christ at his advent found him in full possession of the Jews. "Master," say they, "who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" On another occasion we read that some told him of the Galileans, whose blood had been mingled with their sacrifices; and that Jesus, in answer, denied that they were sinners above all the Galileans, *because* they suffered such things; as likewise, that those upon whom the tower in Silvam fell, were worse than all others who dwelt in Jerusalem.

As I have already said, suffering would not have been present in the world at all but for sin; but then this is not the connection usually thought of, but a purely personal connection, such as Job's friends imagined. The fact is, in all human suffering we ought to see, as its cause, *that* human ill-desert in which *we* have a part, as well as the individual sufferer. Looking upon suffering thus, not as a private relation, but as one which evidences to a universal fallen condition, and which might have found place in our own persons as well as in others, we can entertain a genuine sympathy; for there is no reason, other than God's pleasure, why what has befallen them should not have come upon us; we are no better than they. And so, doubtless, my beloved brethren, there have been great searchings of heart among us all, in reference to the awful *conflagration* of the past week, whereby so large and so fair a portion of our city has been laid in ashes. We can only lift our hands and say: What has God wrought or permitted to be wrought?

With the Redeemer in Jerusalem, we could weep over the city. The heart aches as it thinks of the houseless

poor, the destruction of mansions associated with the sacred past, the desolation of noble halls, the ruin of churches, and of the beautiful cathedral which filled you, by its fair proportions, with a pure delight every time you passed it. We say, with Jeremiah, as we wend our way through the desolated streets, and in view of so many homes now, alas! in ruins: "Mine eye runneth down with water for the destruction of the daughter of my people." "The Lord hath trodden the virgin, the daughter of Judah, as in a wine-press. For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water, because the Comforter that should relieve my soul is far from me—my children are desolate"—"all mine enemies have heard of my trouble; they are glad that thou hast done it."

"It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not;" and, therefore, here, amid the sorrows which encompass us all, and amid the losses of which so many families in this congregation are very largely partakers, I desire, my beloved brethren, as your mouthpiece, to acknowledge God's mercy in the midst of judgment, and to give Him thanks for the preservation of this His sacred edifice, and for sparing you from beholding, *a second time*, your "holy and beautiful house, where your fathers praised God, burned up with fire, and all your pleasant things laid waste." Yes, we have our soul's house, where we may fall down and kneel before our Maker. I thank Him now and here, and in your name, that its Cross is not at this moment in the dust, but that it still shines in the morning sun, and points us away from the smouldering embers and ruins beneath, to those brighter worlds above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of the Father, and to treasures

more precious than of gold tried seven times in the fire. Yea, God has mingled mercy with His judgments. But I am conscious of another circumstance, and one which has been present to all hearts, doubtless, which seems to make this calamity assume still graver proportions. At *any time* it would have weighed us down with sympathy for those who have been so suddenly deprived of cherished homes and of their houses of God; but coming at this particular time, when we are threatened by an invasion from ruthless foes, and when our every nerve and muscle was strained to make a gallant defence—when, too, there was more or less of despondency prevailing in many minds in anticipation of the coming struggle—when all the necessaries and comforts of life were more than usually difficult to procure, and all were more or less straitened in their ability to afford the requisite relief—when for weeks and months past we had been earnestly engaged in ministering to the sick and wounded soldiers, and in contributing to the comfort and efficiency of those in the field—when in every family the ruling question with the oldest and the youngest seemed to be, What can *I* do for the good cause unto which all hearts stand pledged? Oh, then, at such a time of all others, for this destruction to be permitted to take place, appeared strange, yea, passing strange, if God was indeed with us and upon our side. For a little moment, perhaps, our hearts failed us, as we thought that God had forsaken us, in permitting the devouring fire to ravage and lay waste what we had determined to defend with our lives. We fancied we heard the taunt of the foe: "They trusted in God that He would deliver them; let Him deliver them if He will have them."

We had claimed that the manifestations of Providence had been signally in our favor ever since the commencement of this struggle; but had not God now turned against us? This is the thought, I doubt not, which entered many a heart; which had tried to stay itself upon God, as he gazed upon the desolation around him, and then thought upon the enemy at our doors. We fear not man, but if God be *against* us, who shall be our friend?

But this hour and power of darkness was soon passed, and faith, emerging from her brief eclipse, once more asserted her supremacy. It is written, "Clouds and darkness are round about Him, but righteousness and judgment are the habitations of His seat." We have entered the clouds, and like Moses have feared and trembled; but as sure as God liveth, if we but maintain our faith, we shall see the righteousness and judgment of His seat. "For a small moment have I forsaken thee, but with great mercies will I gather thee.

In a little wrath, I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer."

We think upon him who gave utterance to our text. We see him *tried*, not punished. We see him cast down, but not forsaken. Never was God so near to him as when, to mortal ken, God had deserted him. The eye of the Omnipotent was upon him in all his sorrows, marking the trial of his faith; and the everlasting arms were beneath him, making it laudable, glorious and honorable.

And so with us at present—we are being *tried*, not punished. God would prove what our faith is made of: whether it is a mere holiday-faith, which lasts only when

the sun shines, and when all things are prosperous, or whether it is of that robust nature, which will endure a great fight of afflictions—which is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen. And all that tries faith most, necessarily takes on the form of our being forsaken of God.

This is the very essence of the trial, to *believe* that God is with us when, to all appearance, He has deserted us. Examine the cases of Scripture saints, and you will find this to be so. "My God, why hast thou forsaken me!" they exclaim; but the withdrawal was rather in appearance than otherwise. And the truth is, we ought to be like children, who cling to the parent all the more tenaciously by so much as he endeavors to put them out of his arms.

We will say: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him." It is a time for humility, but not for despair. Not thus did they despond in the day of gloominess, "who through faith subdued kingdoms; out of weakness were made strong; waxed valiant in fight; turned to flight the armies of the aliens." Let *us*, therefore, brethren, in this exigency of our affairs, "humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt us in due time, casting all our care upon God, and believing that He careth for us." And He will exalt us, if we trust and faint not. Who knows for what God is preparing us? Often and often he schools and tutors those for whom He has high things in store by the taste of the wormwood and the gall, that they may learn from whence comes their future high estate.

And so, perchance, this, our city—our beloved city—now so depressed and stricken, shall in "due time be

exalted." Beauty shall be given it for its ashes, and the oil of joy for mourning: and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

"O, thou afflicted, tossed with tempest and not comforted, behold I will lay thy stones with fair colors, and thy foundations with sapphires. And I will make thy windows agates and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones. And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of thy children. In righteousness shalt thou be established: thou shalt be far from oppression, for thou shalt not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near thee. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord."